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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an in-depth look at semantics and how it has been and continues to be studied in mass communication. The paper notes that modern communication scholars have largely ignored the importance of semantics to mass media research. The paper examines the historical roots of semantics, noting that the 1930s saw the intellectual blossoming of semantics. The paper briefly examines how semantics plays a role in 11 areas of mass communication research. The paper then summarizes semantic themes in both Eastern and Western philosophy, and discusses three general conceptions of meaning which serve as a basis for linguistic research in semantics and which are widely accepted among linguistic scholars. The paper then discusses a few of the important research projects that have been conducted in the area of semantics and how they relate to mass communication, noting that there should be more interdisciplinary experimentation if semantic research is to progress in mass communication. Contains 28 references. (RS)

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A STUDY OF SEMANTICS

IN

MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

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A STUDY OF SEMANTICS IN MASS COMMUNICATION

By Virginia Mansfield-Richardson
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Abstract

This paper presents an in-depth look at semantics and how it has been and continues to be studied in mass communication. Modern communication scholars have largely ignored the importance of semantics to mass media research. The historical roots of semantics, as well as linguistic and philosophical approaches to the study of semantics are also examined. Finally, this paper suggests how several key mass communication theories can be re-examined within a semantic framework.

SEMANTICS
IN MASS COMMUNICATION THEORY

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to present an in-depth look at semantics and how it has been and is being studied in mass communication. Semantics is the study of meaning in language (Crystal 1987, 100). Although the term *semantics* was not widely used among scholars until the early twentieth century, the concept has been around since the time of the Greek philosophers. The philosophical approach to the study of meaning in language eventually led to the modern linguistic studies in semantics. It is from these two disciplines that mass communication scholars have applied the study of semantics to print journalism, radio and television in communication. Scholarly research in semantics has been greatly developed in philosophy and linguistics, but it is still a new and somewhat neglected area of research in mass communication. This is surprising since the use of words and interpretation of word meanings is extremely relevant to mass communication, particularly news. How news is gathered, written and presented to mass audiences ultimately determines their perception and understanding of the news. Finally, journalism education often has had a prescriptive tone not conducive to embracing new areas of inquiry, including semantics.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

While the concept of how language is interpreted into meaning had been around for centuries, the adjective *semantick* first appeared in English in 1665 in the second edition of John Spencer's book "A Discourse Concerning Prodigies" (Gorman 1962, 2). In this book Spencer talked about *semantick philosophy* , which modern scholars interpret as a prediction on the future understanding of what are now historical sixteenth century signs. Spencer borrowed

the term from the Greek and Latin classics, where the concept of meaning in language was born in Western thought. Several Chinese philosophers also wrote extensively on similar themes dealing with the meaning of words and the restrictive nature of language.

French linguist Michael Bréal was the first to establish an active use of the word semantics (semantique in French) in his book "Semantics: Studies in the Science of Meaning," written in 1883, but not translated into English, by Nina Cust, until 1900 (p. 2). This was the first time that the term was used in explaining the laws of constantly changing meaning in language. Bréal later conducted extensive semantic research in early Greek and Latin text, as outlined in his book "Semantics." In this book he discussed the "pejorative tendency" in the transformation of word meanings over time (Bréal 1964, 99). Bréal argued that a large portion of word meanings change in a negative sense through time. He is one of the few semantic experts to address this phenomena. Bréal explained:

> The so-called pejorative tendency is the result of a very human disposition which prompts us to veil, to attenuate, to disguise ideas which are disagreeable, wounding, or repulsive. (p. 100).

This is one area of semantic research that has direct importance to the types of words and phrases used in describing news events via mass media. Unfortunately, no modern media scholars have looked into this area, and few linguists after Bréal addressed this issue.

From 1900 to the early 1920s the term *semantics* and the study of language meaning that it represented slowly caught on among linguists, at the same time becoming more accepted than an equally new linguistic term, *semasiology,* which is now considered a synonym for semantics (Pei and Gaynor 1945, 193). Neither semantics nor semasiology should be confused with the linguistic concept of *semiotics,* which is the study of the meaning in linguistic signs and symbols.

In 1927 the development of semantics took a positive turn towards acceptance among scholars of several academic disciplines.

This occurred with the publication of an article by Bronislaw Malinowski entitled "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages" (Odgen and Richards 1927, 296). Malinowski was one of the first theorists to widen the meaning of semantics by recognizing the need for a thorough study of the relationship between form (syntax) and meaning. He was also one of the first academics to acknowledge the relationships among semantics, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy, as well as recognizing a need for more theoretical considerations underlying the science of language (Gorman (1962, 3).

The 1930s truly saw the intellectual blossoming of semantics, in which it took off as an academic sub-discipline of linguistics, psychology, and philosophy.

Most linguistic historians agree that Alfred Korzybski, in his famous book "Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics," is the father of modern semantics. He was also the founder of the Institute of General Semantics in Chicago. The book, written in 1933, said, in defining semantics:

> General Semantics is not any 'philosophy' or 'psychology' or 'logic' in the ordinary sense. It is a new extensional discipline which explains and trains us how to use our nervous system most efficiently. (Korzybski, Science and Sanity 1933, xi and xxv)

Korzybski discussed at great length one of the general concepts in modern semantics, which is the constantly changing meaning of language. For example, Korzybski said, the term *science* is one of the most rapidly changing words in our vocabulary in terms of meaning. Korzybski also crystallized other key semantic concepts in his 1933 book, including: 1) the structural differential, where the descriptive label we place on events, concepts or objects is a linguistic abstraction that becomes further diluted with each person's interpretation (p. 389); 2) that language structure is mathematical in nature and it has strong correlation to the human nervous system's

mathematics structure (p. 280); 3) that the mathematical structure of semantics can best be described using differential calculus (p. 573); 4) and that there are conceptual similarities between scientific empirical structures and verbal linguistic structures (p. 637) which includes Korzybski's famous semantic explanation of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity (p. 648). The importance of this book to the study of semantics must not be understated.

However, Korzybski had strong leanings towards science, particularly neurology, and much of his work concentrated on the search for relationships between logic, particularly Aristotelian formulations in logic, and human neurological disorders. This is fascinating work, but it was not fully comprehended by pure linguists who had little knowledge or interest in the brain's biological functions.

Also in 1933, Leonard Bloomfield wrote the book "Language" wherein he said the study of semantics, which he defined as assigning meanings to several phonetic forms, should be divided into two parts: grammar and lexicon (Bloomfield 1933, p. 138). This represented the first real expansion of semantics within the field of linguistics, even though some linguists rejected Bloomfield's division of study.

It was also during this period that the popularity of logical positivism had an impact on semantics. In the 1920s many logical positivists began studying semantics, giving more validity to it as an academic discipline. This historical shift is particularly relevant to the relationship of semantics and mass communication during the latter half of the twentieth century since logical positivism had a great impact on media studies in the 1930s and 1940s. The first logical positivists to incorporate semantics into their research were Polish logicians and mathematicians led by Lesniewski, Lukasiewicz, Kolarbinski, Adjukiewicz, Chwistek (the first of the group to use the word *semantics*), and Tarski (p. 3). Out of this group developed what became known by 1935 as the Polish school of semantics which was one of the first modern official connections between semantics, mathematics and semantics.

However, by 1931 Korzybski became angry with the logical positivist trend in semantic research and he attacked Chwistek and the Polish school of semantics in a paper presented before the American Mathematical Society in New Orleans, on Dec. 28, 1931. In the paper he disclaimed any connection with the linguistic aspects of semantics and blasted the logical positivists:

> I introduced the term '*General* Semantics' for the *modus operandi* of this first non-aristotelian system . . . .A theory of evaluation appeared to follow naturally in an evolutionary sense from 1) 'meaning' to 2) 'significance' to 3) '*evaluation.*' *General* Semantics turned out to be an empirical natural science of non-elementalistic evaluation, which takes into account the living individual, not divorcing him from his reactions altogether, nor from his neuro-linguistic and neuro-semantic environments, but allocating him in a *plenum* of some values, no matter what. (Korzybski, *Science and Sanity,* 1949, 748).

This is further proof of the rapid expansion of semantics during this period into several disciplines, which also resulted in many intellectual battles over how the study of semantics should be approached and what it should encompass. However, in none of this development did the application of semantics to mass communication occur. That was to come in the latter half of the twentieth century when mass communication as a discipline and influence on society experienced immense growth.

It was also in the late 1930s that Charles Morris, a highly respected linguist, further defined three semeiotic (not to be confused with semiotics) divisions, which were adapted by most linguists by the 1940s. Those divisions were:

> 1. ***semantics*** or the problem of the relations between the sign vehicle or the meaning and the object or designatum.

2. ***syntactics*** or the relations of signs to each other.

3. ***pragmatics*** or the relations between sign producers and interpreters, a science evolving from psychology, ethnology and sociology. (Morris 1946, 38).

Bringing in the concept of pragmatism to the study of semantics attracted the interest of human behaviorists to this new linguistic area. This shift is relevant to the study of semantics and mass communications since the psychological trend towards behaviorism also had a great impact on mass media research, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. In fact, in linguistics and mass communications logical positivists lost out to behaviorists in leading the respective fields in research by the 1970s and 1980s. Pragmatism also affected the study of semantics through the idea that the meaning of a word or symbol lies exclusively in its effects on human behavior and not, as linguist S.I. Hayakawa explained, on any "transcendental realm of ideas" (Hayakawa, ETC. Summer 1952, 225). By the early 1950s Hayakawa had established himself as the predecessor to Korzybski as the leading academic expert in the realm of semantics.

Also, after the three decades (1930 to 1960) of much academic hashing out of how semantics should be divided and studied, by the 1960s three branches of semantics emerged and are generally still used in defining the discipline today: 1) the philosophical/logical branch, 2) the linguistic/scientific branch, and 3) the general semantics branch connected with Korzybski. In his 1931 paper, Korzybski officially disconnected himself with the linguistic/scientific branch and clarified his definition of general semantics. However, a new branch of semantics is developing, albeit slowly, in mass communication.

HOW SEMANTICS RELATES TO MASS COMMUNICATION THEORIES

Many of the theoretical approaches to studying mass communication are directly tied to semantics. This section will look briefly at how semantics plays a role in some of this significant mass communication research.

a. **Maximum Effects Theory** states that the mass media can play up an issue or an attitude and convince an audience that it is an important news item. In applying the importance of semantics to this theory, it could be hypothesized that by using certain words or types of words and phrases an attitude or issue can be played up, and thus convince an audience that it is important. There have been a few studies in this area that looked at how political campaigns were covered that will be mentioned later.

b. **Modified Effects Theory** arose as a challenge to the maximum effects theory. It states that audiences are also strongly influenced by other factors, separate from what or how news is presented to them, that influence their appraisal of the news. Here semantics can play a role by using phrases and or words to test their lack of influence on the outcome of an audience opinion. For example, a study could be done to determine if using harsh adjectives to describe a public figure has as much influence on an audience perception of that person compared to other separate variables. Studies could also be conducted to see if "name calling" in such things as political campaigns actually have an influence on audience opinion of candidates.

c. **Play Theory of Communication** states that many people use mass media because it is more like play than work. The semantic question that arises here is whether word structure is perceived as an intellectual game or challenge by audiences. For

example, if a review of a dance concert is written in a lively and unconventional writing style it might attract readers who have no interest in dance, but who find the writing style to be entertaining and challenging to read. So it would be the semantics, not the content, that was entertaining the reader.

d. Cultivation Effects Studies conducted mostly by George Gerbner state that people learn a large part about the world from what they read and from what they see on television. He said that if they see violence on television it will lead them to thinking the world is violent. This directly relates to semantics and raises the question, if people hear or read violent words and violent phrases does it cause them to view the world as violent? Here a study of the effects of rock music lyrics could be directly tied to semantics, or the impact of violent meaning in the lyrics.

d. Symbolic Uses of Institutions as discussed by Murray and Edelman, states that sometimes people have a respect for institutions such as politics because they symbolically perceive them as intellectually out of their reach. Here, the semantic question could be raised of whether official titles and formal language that is used by people running institutions contributes to this phenomena of people perceiving those institutions as being intellectually beyond their capabilities.

e. Spiral of Silence Theory of Elizabeth Noelle-Neuman says that the media devote very little attention to minority issues and members of minority groups, and that when people in minorities look to the media to determine what is going on they conclude that they have very little power because their issues are not "important" enough to get covered. Certainly a study of the type of language used in covering minority issues as compared to the types of words (verb, adjectives, nouns) used in covering mainstream issues would add insight into this theory.

f. Gatekeeping represents a large area of mass communication theory encompassing many theoretical models. However, semantics has not emerged as an area of this research. One suggestion for the connection to semantics and gatekeeping might be discovered if studies were conducted looking into the way news summaries of stories on wire services are written and if that affects if they are selected to run in newspapers and also if it affects the type of coverage given to selected stories. A study could also be done of different words used in describing various sporting events. Is a football game article written in a much livelier manner than a story on an equally or more exciting volleyball match? A few articles have been written on this general topic.

g. Reporters' perceptions of news sources is a much under-studied area of mass communications. Here again semantics might play a role. Does the level of sophistication in the language that a news source uses affect how he/she is perceived by a reporter? It is possible that a highly credible, intelligent, and reliable news source might receive less attention from a reporter because he/she uses incorrect grammar and a regional syntax associated with poor people, over an articulate, but unknowledgeable source.

h. Interviewing processes are very crucial in journalism and in this area it would be interesting to study if the semantics of an interview affect the outcome of the answers given by the person being interviewed.

i. Unnamed news sources might seem to be an area of mass media research that is unrelated to semantics. But, consider the issue of how unnamed news sources are identified in the media. Certainly a study could be conducted of the words and descriptions used to describe unnamed news sources to see if there is a correlation to audience perception of credibility of that source.

j. Generalists vs. Specialists is an ongoing debate in mass communication. Part of what determines whether a person is a specialist is his or her command of the technical language and terms within a specialty. There seems to be plenty of material in this area to measure the use of complex terms by specialty writers in their copy with the question in mind of what their true motive is for using language that might be confusing to readers and editors. In other words, some complex language in specialty stories might reflect a motivation by the writer to "prove" he/she is a specialist.

These are just a few examples of how semantics relates to mass communication theories and issues. It is necessary to make these explanations because of the lack of research being conducted by mass communication scholars in the area of semantics. This may be partially due to a lack of understanding of how semantics relates to print, radio, and television media. This problem will be discussed a bit more in the latter part of this paper.

PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO SEMANTICS

As stated earlier, there are three branches in the study of semantics: 1) philosophical/logical, 2) linguistic/scientific, and 3) general semantics. The oldest of these branches is philosophy, since the concept of semantics dates back to the ancient Greek philosophers, as well as to ancient Asian philosophers, who were the first to debate the nature of meaning in language. The Western philosophical approach to semantics is based on logical theory applied specifically to words and sentences within a single language. In Western thought, which represents the majority of the basis for linguistic and mass communication theory, two views emerged:

> **Naturalist view** is derived largely from Plato (427-347 B.C.) and it maintains there is an intrinsic connection between sound and sense;

Conventional view is derived largely from Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) and holds that this connection between sound and sense is purely arbitrary.

Modern linguists and mass communication theorists believe the conventionalist view is more valid since it emphasizes the arbitrary relationship between words and things/concepts they represent.

Plato is credited with being the first philosopher to distinguish between generalized concepts embodied in language and the numerous specific instances in which these concepts apply. In was in Plato's "Republic" that he made a clear distinction between ideas and specific incidences relating to ideas. This began a realist approach to linguistics and semantics. A second approach grew in opposition to the realists. In medieval times the universalists opposed the realists, and represented more theoretical, intellectual approach to semantics, which was then known just the study of meaning in language. More importantly, the nominalists also opposed the realists during this time, saying that they correlated language meaning to individual things. The nominalists also maintained that all general things, such as reason and justice, were verbal utterances which were useful in identifying things, but ultimately responsible for misrepresenting reality.

Out of this dominant nominalist thought came thinkers such as John Locke, who denied the existence of universals and thus discarded universalist thought, and David Hume who said that all ideas are nothing more than thoughts that are categorized by restrictive language in an attempt to give the idea more significance. Also during the age of reason, Immanuel Kant said the human mind was unable to grasp the essence of things in order to form universal concepts. Therefore, Kant argued, man establishes linguistic categories via semantics into which all reality must fit. All these eighteenth century philosophers developed a more sophisticated nominalist theory of the purpose and uses of semantics.

From the nominalist philosophy of linguistics grew neo-nominalism, which also denies universalism and, most importantly, denies the reality of individuals (Gorman 1962, 9). This is a more

extreme philosophy, which ultimately denies the reality of all things except sensations. There are three schools of neo-nominalism: 1) that which is based on Bertrand Russell's writings which states that the universe cannot be described in nouns, but rather must be explained in terms of strings of events; 2) that which states all things are based on cause and effect and can thus be explained through logic; and, 3) that which says science should redesign language to eliminate terms of subject, predicate, substance and quality, because language does not reflect reality. Both Korzybski and Hayakawa are considered to be neo-nominalists.

These are the most important semantic concepts of Western philosophy, but it is certainly not a comprehensive explanation of the numerous philosophies that have contributed to the study of semantics.

Unfortunately, most discourses on the philosophical approach to semantics are written from a Western view. In Eastern thought there are also many philosophers and schools of philosophy that have as their central focus the role of semantics in the human perception of reality. Confucius (551-470 B.C.) was famous for his saying, "Let the emperor be an emperor, minister be a minister, the father be a father, the son be a son" (Chan 1963, p. 39). This meant, Confucius explained, that a real emperor lives according to the proper definition of the word, as does a father and a son, and that the proper definitions of emperor, father and son includes the moral explanation of these roles. Out of this philosophy grew Confucius' famous school of thought called the rectification of names. Basically this said that people must properly live the role that they are defined as through language. This would mean that an emperor must be moral because language defined the name emperor as such.

There are two foundations to all of Confucian philosophy: 1) the importance of people accepting their proper place in society, and 2) the importance of using words correctly, specifically the ratification of names and where the meaning from a name is truly derived from. The second foundation represents one of the most important semantic approaches to Eastern philosophy.

Much of Chinese philosophy is built upon Confucianism, and Eastern philosophy deals much more with semantics than does Western philosophy. One of the most famous semantic-based philosophical ponderences in Chinese thought comes from Kung-sun Lung (380-unknown B.C.) who describes a guard at a temple who was told not to let anyone riding a horse through the gates. When a man arrives on a white horse the guard refuses his entrance, but the man riding the horse said, "but a white horse is not a horse," and the guard agreed and let him pass. An entire school of philosophy, that states the more adjectives are applied to a description the more narrow the description becomes, is based on this story.

Finally, Taoism (the philosophy as opposed to the religion), which developed in China in the sixth and seventh centuries B.C., is based on the semantic principles that nothing in the world can be described in words and that all true meaning must be derived through emptiness, including the emptiness (lack of) language.

These are brief summaries of the semantic themes in both Eastern and Western philosophy. Above all else in importance here is the fact that linguistic approaches to semantics grew directly from the logically-based Western philosophy of semantics and the moralistic-based Eastern philosophy of semantics.

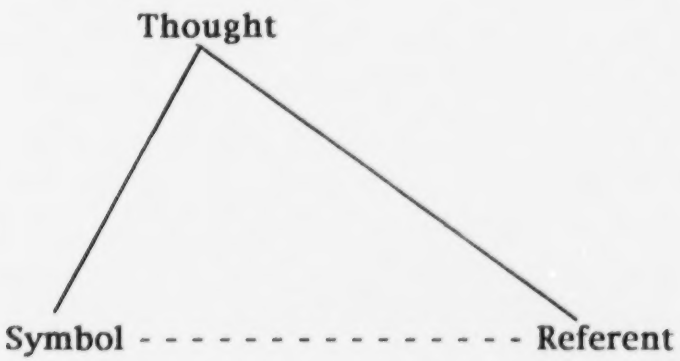
LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO SEMANTICS

Much was explained in the historical section on the development of the linguistic approach to linguistics. There are three general conceptions of meaning which serve as a basis for linguistic research in semantics and which are widely accepted among linguistic scholars: 1) words --> things, 2) words --> concepts --- things, and, 3) stimuli -->words --> responses (Crystal 1987, 109).

a. **Words --> Things** is a view that states that words refer to things. Words such as proper names (i.e., Bill, London) support this idea. However, the majority of words in all languages do not support this theory in that they do not describe things. For example, verbs

such as *ask* and *find*; adjectives such as *difficult* or *popular*, or nouns such as *consistency* or *tradition* do not describe things.

b. **Words --> Concepts --> Things** is a view that denies a direct link between words and things, arguing that the relationship can be made only through the use of our minds. This concept says that for every word there is an associated concept. One of the best representations for this concept came from scholars Charles Ogden and Ivor Richards in 1923 when they developed their "semiotic triangle" (Ogden and Richards 1927, 164):



The main criticism of this approach to the concept of meaning is the difficulty in identifying "concepts." the concept underlying a word such as *tradition* is no easier to define than the "thing" referred to by the word *tradition.*

c. **Stimuli --> Words --> Responses** is a behaviorist view of meaning first expounded by Bloomfield in his book "Language," published in 1933. Here he says meaning is something that can be deduced solely from a study of the situation in which speech is used: The stimulus (S) that led someone to speak (r), and the response (R)

that resulted from this speech (s). Here's how Bloomfield graphically shows this:

S ----------> r . . . . . s ----------> R

Bloomfield says you can tell what the meaning of "r . . . . s" must be just be observing the events that accomplished it. The criticism of this concept is that there are many events in which the stimulus/response connection is not clear. Psychologists and philosophers explain that there are many events that are not clearly visible in physical terms, such as human feelings.

Linguistics is also very much concerned with how language is acquired in the human mind. Many semantic theoretical approaches are based on two widely accepted theories of language learning. Since mass communication research in semantics developed out of linguistic semantic research, these two theories of language learning ultimately are crucial to how semantics are applied to mass media research. The two theories are:

1) **Behaviorist View** which sees language learning as a process of imitation and reinforcement, i.e. learners attempt to copy what they hear. This comes from the behaviorist school of psychology, which is now dominant in both linguistics and mass communications.

2) **Cognitive View** which says humans use their cognitive abilities in a creative way to work out hypotheses about the structure of language.

Mass communication scholars, in the scant amount of semantic research applied to mass media, have been more interested in the behaviorist view of language learning as opposed to the cognitive view. This may be due to the highly structured nature of media presentation via newspapers, books, radio, and television, particularly in dealing with news, that conflicts with the more creative and abstract cognitive view of language learning. Only the more creative and experimental mass mediums of movies and videos

reflect the cognitive view of language learning rather than the behaviorist view.

Another important linguistic approach to semantic research concerns the concept of abstracting. The word *abstract* is often used by linguists to describe the process of perception. According to John Condon, abstracting involves three related phenomena: 1) *ignoring* the majority of the stimuli (that which is observed, heard, or otherwise sensed) that might be perceived, 2) *focusing* on a limited amount of the stimuli, and, 3) *combining or rearranging* what is perceived to fit into a category that suits the cognition patterns of the person doing the perceiving (Condon 1985, 25). This breakdown of how initial perception of events, attitudes, and other stimuli occurs is a commonly accepted concept among linguists. This is directly related to the mass communication and linguistic concept of encoding, which, according to Severin and Tankard, is defined as the "translation of purpose, intention, or meaning into symbols or codes" (Severin and Tankard 1992, 72).

With these limited explanations of philosophical and linguistic approaches to the study of semantics, it is easier to understand how mass communication theorists have approached this linguistic discipline.

MASS COMMUNICATION APPROACH TO SEMANTICS

In the third section of this paper an attempt was made to explain why semantics is relevant to the field of mass communication. Certainly many mass media scholars directly or indirectly acknowledge the importance of semantics, but now influential schools of thought in this area have yet developed in mass communication research. More research that indirectly applies semantics to mass communication has occurred than research directly based on semantics. The largest area of indirect semantic research is in content analysis. Interestingly, the most important research projects dealing directly with semantics also have been content analyses.

All the content analyses are based on the concept of encoding mentioned earlier. In a content analysis researchers are usually measuring the encoding of reporters and editors in articles or broadcasts. That encoding reflects the abstraction, or process of determining what details to use and what to leave out, by the reporters and editors. One of the most fascinating areas of researching semantics in mass communication deals with what is selectively not used in a media presentation. Unlike semantic studies in the disciplines of philosophy, psychology, and linguistics, only mass communication deals as much with deciding what information not to use (often more than what is used) and what information, or stimuli, to use. Hayakawa described differing degrees of abstraction in his "ladder of abstraction" that begins with a non-verbal level of observation, called the "process level," and "climbs" six levels of description from very detailed to broad definitions (see Appendix 1) (Hayakawa 1949, 169).

Unfortunately, no mass communication scholar has attempted to rewrite this ladder and apply it to levels of abstraction in news gathering or in producing a media event. It is likely that a more simplistic ladder could be structured, but it should encompass such important research as Culbertson's study on newsroom communication patterns from bureaus to editors, as well as other researchers' theories of agenda setting, gatekeeping, and structural-functionalism and how that applies to the traditional, interpretive, and activist types of journalists.

Hayakawa also helped define the importance of semantics to mass communication by describing three types of statements people can make: 1) reports, 2) inferences, and, 3) judgments. These have varying degrees of room for objectivity in interpretation, Hayakawa explained. There are two reasons these definitions are important. First, they help reporters in understanding degrees of objectivity in their reporting of statements. Second, and more important to semantic research, they offer a set of semantic response types that can be measured in a content analysis. The easiest statement to measure is the report, and the hardest to measure is a judgment.

Two famous content analyses that brought the importance of semantics to the forefront analyzed how *Time* magazine used language to paint presidential candidates in positive or negative images. The first study was conducted by John Merrill and published in *Journalism Quarterly* in 1965. By measuring various types of words used to credit statements made by presidential candidates or to describe them, Merrill found that *Time* had painted Truman in a negative light, Eisenhower in a positive light, and Kennedy in a neutral tone. This helped to explain why readers surveyed said *Time* was pro-Eisenhower, anti-Truman, and neutral to Kennedy. This survey received a great deal of response and interest from the mass communication scholarly community. Editors at *Time* magazine were angry and defensive over the study, but they also said they would look into their editorial policy to see if it allowed for such biases. The study also immediately sparked a trend in this type of content analysis which studied and counted words and/or phrases to see if semantically a publication or broadcast station was forming a subtle bias for or against a person or issue.

In 1979, a follow-up content analysis was conducted by Fred Fedler, Mike Meeske and Joe Hall to see if *Time* magazine editors had indeed changed their ways to allow for less biased semantics in the magazine's prose. The methodology of the initial study was followed closely, and this time the researchers looked at copy involving Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Much to the dislike of *Time* editors the researchers found similar uses semantics to develop biases towards the presidents. They found *Time* had a negative bias towards Johnson, and favored Nixon during his first term in office, but depicted him in a much more negative light during his second term in office when he was plagued by the Watergate scandal. The study also found that the editors moderately favored Ford, and were highly critical of Carter.

In 1971 scholar Dennis Lowry conducted research that modeled Merrill's 1965 study. Lowry, however, applied this content analysis technique to television network news coverage of Vice President Spiro Agnew before and after Agnew launched a major attack on the media in late 1969. He based his methodology on

Hayakawa's trichotomy of sentence types, and classified all the sentences on Agnew in the broadcasts studied in one of nine categories depending on their semantics. Lowry found that networks did increase their use of "report/attributed" sentences, which were considered the safest of all categories, as Agnew's criticism of the media increased. He found other changes in the use of sentence types as the criticism increased, but also found no change in other types of sentences such as inferences.

Another major research project that had as its purpose the intent of studying semantics and the effects of semantics in television news was conducted in 1972 by Neal Cutler and Albert Tedesco. The study was sponsored by the Foreign Policy Research Institute and it was entitled "The Differential Encoding of Political Images: A Content Analysis of Network Television News." Cutler and Tedesco said their study was groundbreaking because:

> While other studies have performed political content analyses and still other studies have analyzed the content of network news, the current project is the first study to look at television news as presented on television; that is, our content analysis project focused on the videotapes of actual television news broadcasts. (p. 61)

It is difficult to verify this, but the importance of this study was indeed that it was one of the first large-scale studies to involve a content analysis of actual news broadcasts. This was a much larger and long-term study compared to Lowry's content analysis. The purpose of the study was to see just what type of news people received from television. It was based on the knowledge that most people in America get the majority of their political news from television news broadcasts, and that they base their political decisions on these broadcasts. In this extensive study, the researchers counted several variables to reach their conclusions using a quantitative research approach. This study is important to semantics because it was one of the first to demonstrate that content

analysis could be used to quantitatively test various semantic components in television broadcasts. Prior to the study most semantic-based content analysis were conducted in print media.

In 1974 Edward Herman published the results of a research project on news bias in *Journal of Communication* entitled "Diversity of News: 'Marginalizing' the Opposition." This research successfully tied the theory of agenda setting in research conducted by McCombs and Shaw, as well as schema theory to the importance of semantics in selection of news criteria. Herman hypothesized that the American news media gives different coverage to political news events depending on how they relate to political values in the United States. He conducted a content analysis of *The New York Times'* coverage of 1984 elections in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Human rights violations were much higher in El Salvador than in Nicaragua, yet the news coverage mostly ignored this point and gave stress the vindication of democracy in El Salvador, and played down the Nicaraguan elections. So his hypothesis was, in general, proven to be correct.

This research relates to the groundbreaking study of McCombs and Shaw since ultimately the readers of *The New York Times* accepted the editor's bias and judgment of what was newsworthy. It is also related to schema theories that say distortion can result from our personal schemata (ideas that shape our beliefs) that cause us to read what news items that support our schemata, and not read or ignore news that conflicts with our schemata. Herman's semantic analysis of *The New York Times* indicates that news judgment of reporters and editors can also be affected by their personal schemata, or the more macro schemata of national political values.

Two early communication scholars made important discoveries that offered a framework for modern mass communication research in semantics. Benjamin Whorf, an MIT-trained chemical engineer, spent much of his time studying the languages of Native Americans. One of his most important discoveries, made in the 1930s, was in the language of the Hopi Indians, who had no words for time concepts. Whorf realized that the lifestyle of these Native Americans was drastically different from other Americans. In fact, theirs was a

somewhat timeless way of life and the only way they described time was in phrases such as the fall planting season, or rising of the sun. Whorf developed a famous hypothesis from this research that basically said a person's culture actually determines how that person thinks and is ultimately reflected in the language of a culture. This concept is very important to mass communication in the 1990s as global, multi-cultural communication systems continue to expand their coverage of world events. Many newspapers are now published in several languages, which brings up the issue of concepts that cannot be translated from culture to culture. Also, world communication debates such as the New World Information Order, are partially based in Whorf's theory.

Finally, Wendell Johnson, who spent most of his academic career studying people who stutter, discovered through his research in the early 1940s that most Native Americans had no word for stuttering because it did not exist in their culture. Johnson observed Native American children and how they learned to speak. Unlike Americans who decended from European cultures, the Native American parents never scolded children if they spoke in incorrect syntax or grammar. Children with noticeable speech defects were simply not treated as being any different from other children. Johnson determined that this lack of anxiety in language acquisition may have contributed to the total lack of stuttering among Native Americans. So he discovered a psychological link to stuttering directly related to ignoring semantic differences among the children. Johnson later conducted extensive research on his concept of "unconscious projection," which deals with how people project their subconscious thoughts through verbal statements.

These are only a few of the important research projects that have been conducted in the area of semantics and how they relate to mass communication. It is not a comprehensive look at the numerous content analyses and other types of mass media research that dealt with the meaning in language. The most important aspect of this research is that the degree of intellectual growth seen in linguistic and philosophical semantic research has simply not occurred in mass communication research. There have been no

schools or branches to develop, and few researchers seem to want to apply linguistic, psychological, or philosophical discoveries in semantics to mass media issues. This may partially be due to the lack of hard science training in mass communication. Also, much of the linguistic and psychological research requires years of study to fully master and there are not many mass communicators willing to devote their scholarly careers to the study of these disciplines just for the sake of better applying semantics to mass media problems.

But if fingers are to be pointed, there are also not many psychology or linguistic scholars who seem inclined to apply their research beyond the arena of simple words and sentences to the much larger scale of communication to the masses. If semantic research is to progress in mass communication there must be more inter-disciplinary experimentation. It is not a field that can intellectually flourish using the building blocks of other research being conducted in communication theory because it is intricately tied to linguistics, philosophy and psychology.

CONCLUSION

Semantics is a fascinating look into the meaning humankind has perceived in language and how that meaning is derived. The concept of meaning in language has been around since the earliest philosophers of ancient times in both the Eastern and Western cultures. So it is truly a universal topic that has challenged humankind for centuries. Philosophers through the ages developed two approaches to the study of semantics, both based in logic. Linguistics began studies into semantics in the late 1800s, however, the term was not officially used until the early 1920s. In the 1930s and 1940s the linguistic discipline of semantics proliferated intellectually and by the 1960s three clear branches of semantics were being pursued by linguistic scholars.

Mass communication scholars have been slow to grasp the importance of semantics. However, mainly through content analysis, several studies on semantic content in news have been carried out.

Finally, semantics directly relates to many mass communication theories, but scholars must have a strong background in linguistics and psychology to fully understand these important connections.

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